

The David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History
University of Arkansas
365 N. McIlroy Avenue
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-6829

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Arkansas Democrat Project

Interview with

Mark Oswald
Telephone Interview
13 June 2007

Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: This is Wednesday, June 13, 2007. I am sitting in my home in Greenwood, Arkansas, preparing to do a phone interview with Mark Oswald, who is in his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico. This interview is for the project on the history of the *Arkansas Democrat* and [*Arkansas*] *Democrat-Gazette* for The [David and Barbara] Pryor Center for [Arkansas] Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville]. The first thing I need to do, Mark, is ask you if we have your permission to tape this interview and turn it over to the University of Arkansas to be put in the archives and on the Internet.

Mark Oswald: Yes, sure.

JM: Okay. Very good. Just start from the beginning, and I know that you've covered a lot of this in your [*Arkansas*] *Gazette* interview because you did work for both papers. Give me your full name.

MO: Mark Oswald. Yes, I'm trying to—you're the one that hired me.

JM: I thought I did. [Laughter]

MO: I remember I started as an intern or whatever you want to call it—a summer job.

JM: Yes.

MO: In between my junior and senior years. I was going to the University of Texas at the time.

JM: Yes.

MO: I think—got started there—started doing sort of general assignment stuff, I remember, and probably did some police stuff fairly quickly. And then I think even that first summer I was even doing some city hall stuff.

JM: Yes.

MO: And, I mean, I think if I can just ramble on . . .

JM: Yes, go ahead. Let me—before we get into that a little bit, let's just go back early on, though, and cover this because, as I say, it is also in your *Gazette* interview. But you *were* born in Little Rock, right?

MO: Right, yes. I was born and grew up in Little Rock.

JM: Yes.

MO: In old St. Vincent's [Doctors Hospital] downtown.

JM: Yes. And you went to Catholic schools.

MO: Yes, I went to Our Lady of Good Counsel School there near 12th and—not too far from Fair Park, and then I went to Catholic High.

JM: Yes, okay. And you went to Notre Dame [University] for a year and then did a study through Notre Dame, I guess, in France for a year. Correct?

MO: Right. Right.

JM: Okay.

MO: Before ending up in Texas.

JM: And then you went to Texas and enrolled in Texas to study journalism.

MO: Right.

JM: Did you work for the *Daily Texan*?

MO: Yes, I kind of did a little—yes, I worked for the *Daily Texan*, and I kind of did a bunch of different things—did some news reporting, did some music writing—that kind of stuff down there.

JM: Yes. As I remember, the *Daily Texan* was a pretty good college newspaper.

MO: Yes. You know, at that time—I'm not sure this is still the case—but at that time, the school paper was beating the local paper on some local news coverage.

JM: Yes.

MO: You know, it came out five days a week.

JM: Yes.

MO: And there were 40,000 students. I can't remember exactly what the circulation was, but it was a lot. [Laughs]

JM: Yes. That would've been the *Austin American Statesman*—the local paper there.

MO: Right.

JM: Yes. I think you are correct maybe. It got better as time went on.

MO: Right.

JM: And in later years when I was at the *Daily Oklahoman*, I tried to hire several people who worked for the *Austin American Statesman*, and they didn't want to

leave Austin. You know, they had gone to school at Texas, and they loved it, and I think they were all Texans, too, and they loved Austin.

MO: I've got brothers who live down there—my brother and sister live down there, too. I mean, it's—people love it.

JM: Yes. Yes, it is a great city and everything. But even though I could—you know, I offered them more money, they said, “Oh, that's a really good opportunity and that sounds like a lot of fun and a great deal, but I still don't want to leave Austin.” But all of these people had, I think, gone to Texas and taken journalism and had worked for the *Daily Texan*. But, at any rate—so I hired you for a summer job between your junior and senior years. Is that right?

MO: Right.

JM: Yes, okay. What do you remember about the newspaper then as you were just starting out?

MO: That's—I'm just trying to think here. I remember Bill Husted, I guess, was—and who would've been the city editor?

JM: Well, let me think. Of course, Ralph Patrick was at one time.

MO: Yes.

JM: He may—and I think he moved up to assistant managing editor.

MO: Right. Ralph and—I remember just working for Ralph and Bill.

JM: Yes, and then there was another—well, I don't know whether—for a while Larry Gordon was a city editor.

MO: Right. Right.

JM: Did you work for him?

MO: Yes, he was around, too.

JM: Yes, and then I don't remember whether Scudder was ever a—James Scudder was
ever a . . .

MO: Yes, he was there.

JM: Yes.

MO: Yes, those were all people I really liked and respected. That was a good group.

JM: Yes.

MO: You know, I think one of the things you really remember [laughs] is getting up
early because of the afternoon [publication of the] paper.

JM: Yes.

MO: I remember getting up there early, as the new kid being sent over to the
Walgreens [drug store] to get the fresh donuts they made [laughter] and bringing
them back. That's a different era, I guess, when people would just eat bags of
donuts. And getting in there that early and just start making cop calls and stuff.
That seems to be my most vivid memory, is getting up early and getting down
there.

JM: Yes.

MO: As we're talking, I'm trying to—I'm kind of envisioning that newsroom in that
building. Were we on the second or the third floor?

JM: The second floor.

MO: Right.

JM: Yes, and the Linotype machines are on the third floor at that time.

MO: Right.

JM: Yes.

MO: I remember I was just really excited about getting to work at a newspaper.

JM: Yes.

MO: And there was a pretty good—and I remember Ralph was a really good classic kind of hard-edge news guy, and Husted was sort of the colorful sort of, you know, character.

JM: Yes.

MO: And some of a good balance of kind of personalities to deal with.

JM: Yes.

MO: I think it was a great place for me to start working.

JM: Hey, do you remember how you wound up going to work? I know that I hired you, but I just don't—do you remember whether you had applied or just walked in off the street and applied for a job, or how did that happen?

MO: I think basically, you know, I just—I had started taking the journalism classes at Texas . . .

JM: Yes.

MO: . . . and wanted to just see if I could get some work in the field during the summer.

JM: Yes.

MO: And I guess I just kind of lucked out.

JM: Did you go by the *Gazette* and apply for a summer job, too?

MO: You know, I'm trying to remember if I did. I'm not—seems like I would've sent stuff to both papers.

JM: Yes.

MO: But I don't even remember.

JM: What year would that have been? Would that have been about 1974?

MO: Let me kind of get this straight.

JM: Now, I'm talking about your intern [position] here.

MO: Yes. Yes, that would've been the summer of 1974.

JM: Yes. Yes, okay. That would've been after [Walter] Hussman [Jr.] bought the paper, though. I think he bought it in March of 1974—this is summer—so do you remember, was Hussman already the owner when you got there?

MO: I believe so.

JM: Yes.

MO: I guess at that point I wasn't really even worrying about who owned the paper.

JM: Yes. [Laughs]

MO: Yes, I'm thinking he was always the owner because I don't remember any kind of—you know, between the summer and then when I came back the following year, I don't remember any change.

JM: Yes, okay. So you did a lot of things even that first year as an intern, and I think you had mentioned in the *Gazette* interview that we weren't probably overburdened with a number of reporters at that time.

MO: Yes. I remember—I guess I—I'm just thinking back right now that I don't recall that first summer—yes, I mean, I think that's one reason I got to do a lot was because there just was not a whole lot of reporters.

JM: Well, I suspect that another reason, though, was [laughs] that you were pretty

capable. I think I remember, and I'm sure that Ralph Patrick—remember, the city editor would've noticed that right away. But I think we were pretty impressed right away that you could do what we were asking you to do.

MO: Yes. Well, I don't know—I was just really excited to get to do it, as I recall.

JM: Yes.

MO: I remember the fact of not having very many people on staff, seemed to grow a little more acute maybe—you know, when I came back there.

JM: Yes.

MO: I can't think of numbers or anything.

JM: I think that's true later on. It began to get even tighter later on, I think. I think that in that stage we were still—well, I say we—Hussman was still trying to be as competitive as possible. I think we'd still had as much as we'd had under the previous regime and maybe even a little bit more, and we were still trying to be as competitive as we could.

MO: Yes. No, it was—I remember—and then when I got back after I—you took me back after I graduated—I'm trying to remember—in short order I started covering city hall. I can't remember if there was some interim there where maybe I did some cop stuff, but fairly soon I was doing the city hall beat.

JM: Yes.

MO: And that's kind of getting thrown into the fire, and that's good.

JM: Yes, yes. Yes, that was an important beat for both newspapers. Yes, but at any rate—what kind of a newspaper was—when you came back full time that first year after you got out of Texas, which would've been 1975—what kind of

newspaper was the *Democrat* then?

MO: What would I say? I guess I'd say I think it was kind of a combination—I'm just trying to kind of see what I would say there—I think it was—you know, it was the number two as far as, like, size and all that.

JM: Yes.

MO: We were going up against that more established *Gazette* at that point.

JM: Yes.

MO: But it seemed like you had a good combination of sort of covering the hard news, maybe, kind of from Ralph's point of view, and then you kind of had people like Husted around who kind of were always looking for the funner, kind of more quirky kind of, you know . . .

JM: Feature stories?

MO: . . . featurey kind of thing, which the *Gazette* didn't really seem to do much of at that time.

JM: Yes.

MO: I think in one way there was sort of a perspective in that newsroom to kind of look for the kind of funner, kind of reader-friendly kind of stuff.

JM: Yes.

MO: So I mean, I think it was a good paper.

JM: Yes. What do you remember about the rest of the staff? Do you remember any of the rest of the staff at that time?

MO: I'm trying to—you know, I hadn't even thought about this until you're asking me. I mean, there was Roger Armbrust. Was that his name?

JM: Yes.

MO: He was another I just liked as a character. He seemed like a really good reporter, but he kind of had a real hippie aspect to him, too.

JM: Yes.

MO: I remember he was somehow into poetry. I'm trying to remember what he did in that.

JM: Still is.

MO: Is he still around?

JM: Yes, he just moved back to Little Rock within the last six months or a year.

[Laughs] And this is something that I just discovered. He had been the national news editor for some magazine that's sort of the bible of the Broadway stage, and I can't remember—*The Stage* or something. I don't remember.

MO: That's great. Right. Yes. And then I'm just trying to kind of picture like a—who was Husted's wife? I remember her.

JM: Oh, Amanda.

MO: Yes. And Brenda Tirey was around.

JM: Yes.

MO: And I remember—this is just a—I'm just kind of remembering things at random here a little bit. I was always impressed with the way—I remember Brenda would cover things like the—whatever they called the agency that regulates electricity and water.

JM: Yes.

MO: Covering these complicated rate hearings and phoning in a story on deadline.

JM: Yes.

MO: I was quite impressed with that.

JM: I guess that was the Public Service Commission.

MO: Yes. Yes, that's it. Right.

JM: Yes.

MO: And I'm trying to think of who was around.

JM: Was Steele Hays there then?

MO: Yes. Now I'm trying to remember if Steele—Steele was around both—I guess when I was at both papers.

JM: Yes.

MO: I can't remember when I first met him, but I guess maybe that was—he started—he might have started at the *Democrat* around the time I was starting.

JM: Yes, for some reason I saved some of my old staff rosters, and I've got two from 1975—one in February—you were not there, and then in September I've got one, and you are on the staff then just on general assignment. But let's see—other reporters we had then—Larry Gordon *was* the city editor then, and Nancy Miller as the assistant.

MO: Who was the assistant?

JM: Nancy Miller.

MO: Oh, yes. Yes.

JM: And she's now editor of the lifestyle section of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* [Missouri].

MO: Oh, great.

JM: And Brenda Tirey was there. David Terrell was there. Linda Zimmer, Armbrust, Jim Allen, Mel White, Bob Sallee, Dorothy Palmer, Jerry Dean, Mark Oswald, James Scudder, and Al May was our [laughs] Hot Springs correspondent.

MO: Well, that's actually a pretty good group. Scudder—yes, he was like one of the old pros around.

JM: Yes.

MO: He would always offer advice.

JM: And a good writer.

MO: Yes, I mean, a really good writer.

JM: Yes.

MO: And Terrell—he was kind of—I kind of hung out with him a little bit.

JM: Yes.

MO: No, that was—you know, when I think back about it, that's a pretty good group of people.

JM: Yes, it is. I thought so, too, that it was a pretty talented group, and a lot of them have done well and stayed in the business. Al May is now a professor at a university in Washington, D.C. I can't remember whether it's George Mason or—I think it may be George Mason. Mel White is working freelance but has done a couple of featured articles for *National Geographic*.

MO: I remember Jim Allen. Now, Jim Allen went into some kind of corporate PR [public relations], right?

JM: Yes. Basically it was with a trucking company—a huge trucking company.

MO: Right.

JM: You were—so at some point—you were on general assignment then, but at some point you went to city hall, right?

MO: Yes. Yes, I think I did that for a couple of years, you know, before going over to the *Gazette*.

JM: Yes.

MO: I just remember it being kind of a—it was a good place—a fun place to work. I felt like I was just starting—I was trying to kind of figure out how to do the job, but there was a lot of good people around to learn from. I just remember something I remember Ralph said once, and it's sort of different than it is today, where people maybe are worried a lot about, you know, libel and different things. Ralph said something along the lines of he was more worried about getting things into the paper than finding ways to keep them out of the paper or something like that.

JM: [Laughs]

MO: So he had that kind of aggressive side to him that I liked as a reporter. That was good.

JM: What was your view at that time of the competition of the *Gazette*?

MO: Well, you know, I guess—like I said, I think we kind of saw ourselves as the underdogs somewhat.

JM: Yes.

MO: And I think we kind of saw ourselves, like I say, as kind of the feisty underdogs.

JM: Yes.

MO: And I remember in my—I kind of remember more of my side of it where I was—I

remember I was competing with Bob Stover from the *Gazette*.

JM: At city hall.

MO: At city hall.

JM: Yes.

MO: And he was a really good reporter, and it was going to take me a while to catch up to him and his sourcing and kind of understanding and stuff.

JM: Yes.

MO: But, you know, I did what I could. You know, I'm just thinking out loud here now—I remember old Bob Sallee—now, maybe you remember it differently—he seemed to have—you know, he'd been on that cop beat for so long . . .

JM: Yes.

MO: . . . that he seemed to be really good at that. I remember going down there and kind of hanging out—you know, it was in the old days when there was—they actually had a little press room at the police station. I don't know—they probably don't do that anymore—maybe they do. And he seemed to be part of the institution.

JM: Yes.

MO: No, I guess the way—and this is the way it kind of evolved, I guess, a lot over the years was you looked at the *Gazette* as, you know, the more established, sort of bigger paper, and we were kind of trying to kind of be the underdog who kind of poked them when we could.

JM: Yes.

MO: That's sort of how I kind of remember it.

JM: Yes. I note that at one point in time on the staff rosters here that apparently we moved Sallee—yes, he had been on the police beat for ages and really knew every policeman and everything—but I think we moved him to the county beat and that you were maybe on the police beat for a short time.

MO: Yes, I think that's right. I think I was doing the cops for some period there—you know, maybe for several months before I moved to city hall, because I remember I was going down there and doing the stuff in the morning. Yes, that's right. I know I did the police beat for a while. It's hard for me to remember if I was doing it sort of full-time or part-time or part of my job.

JM: Yes.

MO: No, but I was doing the cops.

JM: Well, on the roster here—and I guess that's sort of pretentiousness on our part—we had you listed as crime and law enforcement—[laughs] covering crime and law enforcement.

MO: Right.

JM: I thought before we just listed you as the police beat, but [laughs] we listed you as crime and law enforcement. So we must've had you doing some other stuff, too, but I don't remember. But you don't remember any particular stories, say, that you were involved in or significant stories or . . . ?

MO: There's the cop stuff—I'm trying to remember. Nothing really jumps out at me. I guess it seems like I was just doing that kind of daily sort of thing.

JM: Yes.

MO: I don't—you know, I'm trying to—as things evolved, there were some, like,

politics involving the police department around that time, you know, and who would be chief and stuff.

JM: Yes.

MO: Glen—what was his name—Weeks or . . . ?

JM: Yes, Gale Weeks.

MO: Yes, Gale Weeks was chief, and there was politics—sort of controversy around him, but I don't remember—I'm kind of getting my different times as far as when I was covering city hall [laughs] and police together.

JM: Yes, but I think you're right—in some point there, and I can't remember who replaced Weeks—maybe Sonny Simpson. I'm not sure.

MO: Yes, and then we had the other guy who ended up committing suicide after he kind of—there was this allegation he had taken things from the till out at—who was the city—who was the pharmacist was so big in city politics?

JM: Oh, Wimberly.

MO: Yes, out at his place.

JM: [George] Wimberly.

MO: Yes.

JM: Yes.

MO: Anyway . . .

JM: Yes, I had forgotten, and I can't remember the guy's name that committed suicide, though. [Editor's Note: Little Rock Police Chief Jess F. "Doc" Hale]

MO: Yes, me either.

JM: But, at any rate, what kind of atmosphere was there in the newsroom at the

Democrat in those days?

MO: I would say it was sort of loose, you know?

JM: Yes.

MO: I've been in different places now over the years, and I would say it was sort of loose—"try to do a good job, but have some fun." Fun atmosphere, I would say. You went down the list of those people—those were some pretty interesting kind of individuals. Almost everybody you named had kind of a strong, different personality.

JM: Yes.

MO: So it was sort of—I would just say kind of lively and kind of fun and loose is what I would say.

JM: I note that after you'd been there a year or two, Garry Hoffman came on the staff.

MO: Yes, I had gone to high school with him.

JM: Okay.

MO: And I think I actually recommended him. He had been working at the paper in Stuttgart, as I recall.

JM: Yes, I think that's right.

MO: I grew up with him from the first grade through high school.

JM: Well, I think you may have recommended him maybe to Ralph or to me too, but I think I remember hiring him so . . .

MO: Right.

JM: Yes.

MO: So Jerry [Dean] came on. I can't remember what he was covering right off the

bat.

JM: Well, he started, like everybody else, on general assignment, I think, but then he may have switched before too long. So was there much pressure from up above, trying to beat the *Gazette* or what seemed to be the attitude on that?

MO: You know, in any newsroom that's what you're trying to do.

JM: Yes.

MO: I don't remember feeling like—particularly, since I was sort of a younger guy, maybe going up against a more experienced guy across the street, that I felt like there was some—I was, like, under the gun—you know, it was like life and death.

JM: Yes.

MO: I don't remember that kind of pressure that, you know—to look down the road here, you know, ten years later in the middle of the newspaper war.

JM: The war, yes.

MO: Where every sentence in every story was starting to be sort of reviewed to see who had more—it got much more intense down the road.

JM: Yes, I heard. I wasn't there then, but I heard.

MO: You always wanted to win, but I don't—I didn't feel that sort of, like, intense pressure that kind of came along later from the other side.

JM: In other words, there was the desire to be competitive and beat the *Gazette*, but you weren't going to cut any throats if you got beat on the case. [Laughs]

MO: Right, right.

JM: Yes.

MO: Yes, I think that's a good way to put it.

JM: Yes, okay. What do you remember about the building itself, and, say, in particular, the newsroom? Anything that stands out in your memory about that?

MO: It just kind of had that—I'm just thinking it sort of had that classic sort of newspaper and newsroom look. Yes, I remember—I'm just trying to picture it right now with, like, the city desk kind of like—was sort of like, you know, a—more or less in the center of the room up against that one wall where the desk editors were there.

JM: Yes.

MO: And your office was back toward the front of the building, I think.

JM: Right.

MO: You know, it kind of had that classic big sound and—you know, before everything was totally—you know, that was before everything was—I'm trying to remember if—I'm actually trying to remember my first summer there, if we even had those—if we were still working just on typewriters, I think.

JM: Yes, at some point in time, but it was a while. I believe that Walter put all that stuff in, and he may not have—at some point after he arrived, well, he went out somewhere and bought a computer and maybe also bought a scanner. They got to the point . . .

MO: Yes, you had this big thing where you scanned it in.

JM: Yes, you had to type your story in on an IBM [International Business Machines] Selectric typewriter and then they fed it into the scanner, and that punched it out at first, I think, just on tape, you know, which was then taken up to run—drive a Linotype machine. Then, later on, you know, it evolved and we went into

computers. But computers were used for a while to edit the copy that had gone through the scanner. So I think it was a while, and that may have been the greatest abomination [laughs] that ever happened to . . .

MO: That was sort of a halfway measure that was [words unclear].

JM: Yes. Yes, it was a *terrible* halfway measure, too, but I guess it was maybe cost effective, although I'm not sure about that. But it was sure a pain to deal with. But I guess they may have still been—by the time you arrived, they may have still been—the teletype machines of the Associated Press and the United Press [International] . . .

MO: Yes, you had all that noise going on—that kind of tapping noise all the time.

JM: Yes, clickity-clacking. Yes.

MO: And, you know, the AP machine—the stuff was coming over on those big reams of paper—it was going off that thing.

JM: Yes.

MO: But the thing I remember the most is [laughs]—I mean, and I think was also just sort of exciting, was getting up early, running down there, kind of being the early person. There'd be an overnight cop thing or something had happened and trying to get—and what was it? The standard deadline was, like, 10:00 in the morning.

JM: Yes, I think that's about right because the paper was supposed to, you know, go to press by—be ready to go to press by 11:30 or something like that. So you had a lag in there between when you turned your copy in, and then it got edited and headlines written and all that stuff, so it probably was around 10:00.

MO: I remember . . .

JM: The first deadline.

MO: This has nothing to do with any big story. It's a little bit of an example of that afternoon paper sort of having a—I remember I was the early guy, and I remember downstairs where you came in through the front door, and you'd walk upstairs, you know, to the newsroom. There was that kind of front office for the public—their interface with the public area.

JM: Yes.

MO: There was a desk where people brought obits [obituaries].

JM: Yes.

MO: I remember one morning someone had put an obit in there for one of the people who is an executive of one of the big department stores. I guess we had Pfeiffer's, Blass, and [M. M.] Cohn's.

JM: Yes.

MO: I remember we were—I worked on it all morning. We kept trying to call, but there was a blank for when the guy died.

JM: Hmm.

MO: And we—I think five minutes before deadline, finally I got a hold of somebody somewhere. Maybe—it was either the family or the funeral home. They said, "Oh, no, we—he's sick. He hasn't died yet. We just brought that by to kind of give you all some—" But it almost went in the paper.

JM: Oh.

MO: I remember—somehow we caught it, you know, a couple of minutes before time.

JM: Oh, yes.

MO: I wish there was some way I could just kind of—I *know* if I could just go back and look at some old papers, some of these stories would get me thinking.

JM: Yes. Well, that's true. I have done that, since I've been working on this project, so I've gone to the library in Little Rock and—the main library—and looked at the microfilm, and a lot of those old stories sure dredged up a lot of memories. Do you remember the working conditions upstairs? What do you remember about working up there?

MO: You know . . .

JM: Let's change the tact a little bit here. How about salary and benefits and all that stuff?

MO: Yes, you know, I don't know. I'm sure it wasn't much. But it seems to me, getting out of college and getting to do it, it seemed like it was okay.

JM: Yes.

MO: I mean, I guess there was—I guess I wouldn't want to speak real definitively on this, but I guess everyone basically always felt we weren't getting paid a whole lot.

JM: Yes, I think that's safe to say. [Laughter]

MO: Obviously, it's different for me just starting out than with people who'd been around a while.

JM: Yes, and married and everything.

MO: Right.

JM: You weren't married at the time so . . .

MO: Yes, I was footloose then.

JM: When *did* you get married?

MO: I remember—this is a story I’ve told over the years—I was working at the *Democrat* about a year, and I went to—I needed to go see the doctor for something—nothing serious, I remember. And I went to this physician who—and my whole family went to—my parents and everybody.

JM: Yes.

MO: So the nurse, who was this old kind of character who was running the front—a nurse or office manager, and I go in, and she says, “Well, what are you doing now?” And I go, “I’m a reporter for the *Democrat*.” And she said, “Well, didn’t you go to *college*?” [Laughter] And then the next—you kind of keep going. And she says, “Well, are you married?” And I go, “No, not yet.” She said, “Well, I guess being a reporter is not much of a job for a married man.” That was kind of

JM: Yes, that was . . .

MO: She did not hold the job in great esteem.

JM: Yes, that’s true. Well, some people didn’t. That is true.

MO: But that was really an interesting group of people, and I’m glad you ran down the list because that was a talented group, and they were all kind of strong personalities, you know. That’s an interesting bunch.

JM: *And*, incidentally, [laughs] a lot of them wound up at the *Gazette*.

MO: Yes, I know. Terrell was over there. Jerry Dean, in later years, was there.

JM: Yes, and Dorothy Palmer.

MO: Yes. Oh, yes, Dorothy Palmer, that’s right.

JM: Garry went over there—Steele Hays.

MO: Yes, that is interesting that it had that kind of migration slowly but surely.

JM: Yes. Well, when did you leave? You went from the *Democrat* to the *Gazette*, right?

MO: Yes, I want to say I was at the *Democrat* for three years. So I think it was about 1979 when I went over to the *Gazette*.

JM: That—I'm trying to think—my last staff roster that I had, you were still doing the city hall at the *Democrat*, which was in January of 1978. I left in August of 1978 and went to Oklahoma City. I think you were still there then.

MO: Yes, I'm almost certain it was 1979. I've always had it in my head I did three years there.

JM: Yes, because they went to the—the *Democrat*, I think, starting switching to morning publication in about January of 1979, I think. And [John Robert] Starr came in—well, that's one way we can judge—Starr came in, oh, a month or two after I left in August. Did you work for Starr?

MO: No. I think I left right before—you know, a few months before they switched to the morning publication.

JM: Yes. Well, you probably left in late 1978 then.

MO: Right. I think that must be right because it was not to the morning publication yet.

JM: Okay. And you did not work for Starr.

MO: No.

JM: John Robert Starr. Okay. Well, I think he—I left in early August, I think, of

1978, and I don't remember how long it was—maybe a month or two—maybe a couple months after that that they brought Starr in. So you must've left pretty shortly after I did—somewhere along in there.

MO: Yes, somewhere right around that time.

JM: Yes, okay. So why did you leave and go to the *Gazette*?

MO: You know, I guess I would just say I think it was—they were kind of the bigger paper.

JM: Yes.

MO: And also at that point, I think the staffing at the *Democrat* had gotten—you know, unless I'm misremembering this, it had kind of gotten smaller and smaller—that we were down to a fairly small crew right there at that era. You know, it's sort of ironic considering how soon after that, you know, he [Hussman] really put a lot of money into it and—I mean, as far as—it took a lot of bodies . . .

JM: Yes, and hiring people.

MO: Right.

JM: I think Lynda Zimmer told me at one time, and it may be in her interview, that the staffing was getting so tight that that was one thing that prompted her to look for something else, too.

MO: And there was also some sort of personal stuff, like I was dating or getting ready to marry, you know, Ruth, and Mamie Ruth, although she had a—everybody knew her, and she had connections with reporters all over the place—she was really good friends with Ernie [Dumas] over at the *Gazette* and all this stuff.

JM: Yes.

MO: So there was sort of some—a little bit of personal stuff there, too.

JM: Yes, we're speaking of Mamie Ruth Williams.

MO: Right.

JM: Okay, now. This is Side 2 of this tape. I'm visiting with Mark Oswald, and we were talking about his future mother-in-law, Mamie Ruth Williams, who I was saying was a friend of mine, and I had attended a Sunday school class that was my all-time favorite Sunday school class because she taught about the world's religions. She taught about Buddhism and Hinduism and Mohammedism [Islam] and everything else. But Mamie Ruth was one of the most effective and best-known political activists in Little Rock, I guess you could say.

MO: Right. Right. She was—yes, she was quite a personality. But there was some kind of—little bit of personal connection there. Ruth, my [then] soon-to-be wife, had worked over there in the library as a college student.

JM: Yes.

MO: And stuff like that. Ruth actually did some work for the *Democrat*, too, on sort of a freelance basis a little bit. We still have a copy of an article she wrote on Ralph Abernathy.

JM: Hmm. Okay.

MO: I guess it was sort of the feeling it was moving up to the bigger paper and the kind of personal connection stuff.

JM: Yes. Do you remember your salary? Do you remember how much a boost in salary you got for making the change?

MO: I don't remember [laughs] getting a big one.

JM: Yes.

MO: Probably some, but that doesn't even ring a bell. [Laughs] There must've been some kind of bump up, but I just don't really remember it.

JM: Yes. Okay. So you went to the *Gazette* in late 1978, and you were there until they closed [in October of 1991], right?

MO: Yes.

JM: Yes. And you eventually wound up . . .

MO: I wound up first—I worked briefly for *Spectrum*, the weekly—whatever you want to call them—alternative weekly there in Little Rock. Kind of a—was it a—like, for six months it was kind of a good period to be doing something there because all the [Bill] Clinton stuff was cranking up, and we got to do a couple stories of, like, Gennifer Flowers and some other stuff, and some other Clinton business.

JM: Okay, now you're talking about after the *Gazette* closed?

MO: Yes.

JM: Yes, okay.

MO: Yes. But then I kind of kept looking around and ended up out here working for the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, covering state government for them.

JM: Yes, okay. How long did you work for the *New Mexican*?

MO: It was eight years, and then after eight years I came over and became the editor for the Santa Fe section for the *Albuquerque Journal*.

JM: Okay. You're still working for the *Albuquerque Journal* but living in Santa Fe, right?

MO: Right.

JM: Yes, and you're editor of—what do they call that section?

MO: They call it the Journal North.

JM: Yes, okay.

MO: It's a daily section in there seven days a week.

JM: Yes. Do you still cover state government, or are you just mainly an editor?

MO: I am the editor, although every once in a while when we're short or something, I fill in and do reporting stuff.

JM: Yes.

MO: But I'm the editor. I've got, like, nine reporters and a couple of photographers that work for me, and there's a couple of other editors involved.

JM: Yes, okay. So this is a daily section, then—not just once or twice a week.

MO: Yes, it's daily. It's six to ten pages a day.

JM: Yes, okay.

MO: It's sort of a different—I mean, I think maybe the *Democrat-Gazette* does something sort of similar, but on kind of a bigger scale up in northwest Arkansas, where they wrap around the statewide paper or something like that. That's what we do here. We're the first section wrapping around the statewide paper for Santa Fe and other parts of northern New Mexico.

JM: Yes. Well, the *Democrat-Gazette* now is just doing a—I think a different edition. But at any rate—so, yes, that is a big operation. But that sounds like a pretty good-size operation you've got going there.

MO: It's a big operation for one of its—I call it the exile operation up here.

JM: Yes.

MO: You know, we compete with the *New Mexican*, my former employer.

JM: Yes.

MO: And they have a lot more people than us, but we do pretty good. We kind of—I think we hold our own pretty good.

JM: Yes. One difference between the northwest Arkansas, and your edition is you don't have the state university and the football team and basketball and everything to cope with.

MO: Right. Right. Santa Fe is like its own little—it's sort of a—you know, it's its own little orbit, of course.

JM: Yes.

MO: I mean, it's a different—I mean, it's sort of a yin and yang thing between Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Santa Fe is the kind of stranger artistic sort of—and with a more heavily Hispanic culture up here. And Albuquerque—it's much more sort of the all-American city. It's kind of the booming place. It's just different.

JM: Now I know you covered quite a bit of it in your interview for the *Gazette* with Ernie Dumas about the war between the newspapers after you went there and the war—and it wasn't long after you went there before they started—they went morning and they started expanding the paper, and they hired a lot more reporters and editors, and they let out a lot of space. They actually wound up, I think, with more space than the *Gazette*. Is that correct?

MO: Yes. I mean, it was—that was fairly amazing that—it's probably—I mean, I never have heard, you know, Hussman kind of talk about the whole genesis of the thing, but, you know, it's fairly obvious that at a certain point he just decided to

throw a whole lot of resources at it and totally change, you know, from when—when I left the *Democrat*, it was down to that spartan few.

JM: Oh, yes.

MO: Yes. I mean, they had more reporters. They were not—almost none of them had a whole lot of experience.

JM: Right, yes.

MO: But they brought in some good people and they just—yes, they had tons of space. Yes, they were throwing more people at it. I think they had a bigger staff than the *Gazette* as far as reporters on the street.

JM: Yes, I think that's true. Yes, if you haven't read it and you're interested, I recommend that you read Hussman's interview. Roy Reed, you know, was in charge of the project on the *Gazette*, and it was near the end of that, and I don't know whether he asked Walter or Walter asked him, but Walter wanted to talk about, you know, the war to a degree, and he had a—I think Roy had a four-hour interview with Walter that's online.

MO: Well, I need to look at that.

JM: And which he talks about the genesis of that and one of the things that happened was that he thought they were about to—the *Democrat* was about to go broke—about to go out of business. His dad said, “You know, we decided we would give it three years, and we've had it three years—a little longer—we're still not making money.” So he decided—he went to Hugh Patterson and asked Hugh to enter into a joint operating agreement.

MO: Right.

JM: And twice he did that, and twice he was rebuffed by Hugh.

MO: Right.

JM: And that would've been one of those things that if Hugh had taken up the joint operating agreement, the *Democrat* would've been nailed forever as the afternoon newspaper, and it would've been set up—he even offered to only make the *Democrat* and use Pulaski County or, you know. But, at any rate, it was turned down. And at some point he decided, he says, that before he'd just completely give it up, he was going to try all these things. And he started shopping around, and the first two big things that he tried was, one, giving away free classified [advertisements] and then switching to morning [publication].

MO: Right. Right.

JM: And then, you know, expanding the staff and expanding the space and everything.

MO: Well, I guess I had heard that also—didn't he offer to just sell it to Hugh Patterson?

JM: Yes. Yes, he did offer to sell it to the Pattersons, and Hugh's thesis was that it would be difficult to get around the federal government on that on the antitrust laws and everything else that—and he said that—of course, now, this is according to Walter—he said that the only way that he might be permitted to buy it was if somehow the *Democrat* just, you know, tried to sell elsewhere but couldn't sell—nobody would buy it—and could go back and show, you know, that it was really on hard times—nobody else was interested in it, and, you know, he said, “And then you have to establish a monument to your failure.”

MO: Right. [Laughter]

JM: And Walter says at that point, you know, he said, “To hell with it.” So he decided that he was going to give it a try, and try all these things. But at any rate—one thing I’m curious about is that after—and you were at the *Gazette* at that time and then he started trying this and, you know, letting out the paper—what was the attitude at the *Gazette* at that time? Was there any concern about the competition from the *Democrat*?

MO: You know, I think kind of on a staff level, there was. As a reporter you were going, “Well, they’ve got more *people* than us,” you know?

JM: Yes.

MO: And especially when he added that staff in there . . .

JM: Yes.

MO: You know, I think—I’m sure we were pretty arrogant, too, as kind of the big old *Gazette* and all that sort of institutional stuff about the *Gazette* and the history and all that. But I think I’m remembering this correctly—at least as kind of down in the trenches, I think there was. I’m not sure, you know, how much of that sunk in up at the top initially, but I feel like—and they had some pretty good kind of aggressive reporters. And like I think I told Ernie—you know, I think what their kind of—the change at the *Democrat* kind of exposed that the *Gazette* had become a little—kind of stodgy in its coverage.

JM: Yes.

MO: Was a little bit stuck in the old newspaper of record thing, whereas the *Democrat* was trying to go out and do different things. You know, kind of maybe more investigative, more enterprise stuff.

JM: Yes.

MO: And I think that—within a few years you could kind of see that.

JM: Did that prompt some changes at some point in time on the way the *Gazette* operated?

MO: You know, I don't know. I don't remember anybody really kind of, you know, calling everybody and saying we're going to do anything differently, you know. I guess it did kind of light the competitive fires.

JM: Yes.

MO: We got a—and like we were just saying, as it developed, you know, it really did become kind of this “tooth-and-nail” sort of competition on everything. And maybe—you know, maybe looking back on it, obviously maybe the paper should have been doing some stuff more like that before being inspired by the competition.

JM: Yes, yes. As I've heard, and all this time I was in Oklahoma City on the paper over there, I've heard that they got to the point where they were going around and bragging about who had the most reporters on this story. Or, “We had eight people covering this” and the other one said, “Well, we had *nine*.” [Laughs]

MO: Well, I remember there was actually at one point—and I know the *Gazette* did it and maybe the *Democrat* was doing it—there would be this house ad in almost every day saying, “Here are stories we had that weren't in the other paper.”

JM: Yes.

MO: And it would be, you know, everything from a water committee meeting to something bigger and better. [Laughs]

JM: Yes.

MO: It would be a list of everything that appeared in the *Gazette* as opposed to what was in the *Democrat*.

JM: Even some smaller, insignificant stories, I take it.

MO Right.

JM: Both major and everything.

MO: Right.

JM: I've heard reports, thought, that Hugh talked to the staff at least a time or two and said, "Don't worry about it. They're not a threat, and we're going to prevail." Were you in on any of those?

MO: You know, I don't recall—I mean, maybe I heard that indirectly. I don't remember. I'm not sure I ever heard that . . .

JM: Yes, okay.

MO: . . . directly from him, but I'm not saying it didn't happen.

JM: Yes, yes. Well, I know that—I think I've heard that from more than one person, but I know that one guy who specifically mentioned it was George Arnold.

MO: Right.

JM: You know George.

MO: Yes.

JM: And George had gone—had been at the *Democrat*, too, and had gone to the *Gazette*, and maybe kind of late. But he specifically mentioned that, and he said he remember thinking at the time that maybe Hugh was being a little cavalier about it—that he maybe should've been more concerned.

MO: I think, you know, when people really started to wonder is like when some of the advertising stuff happened, you know, with the Dillards. And then there was the lawsuit over the advertising rates.

JM: Yes.

MO: Then, of course, the sale to Gannett and things [looked] a whole [lot] different.

JM: Yes, I remember some of this, and I share your view of it. You said that maybe the downfall of the *Gazette* really came about when they lost the lawsuit.

MO: Right.

JM: And I share that view, too. [Laughs] I thought it was a mistake from afar, but I had covered some antitrust stuff over the years, and I thought it was a mistake to file it [laughs]. And then when they lost there, you know, and the way they lost with them testifying, you know—“Well, if you don’t rectify this, this is just going to put us out of business,” and then to have to turn around and come back and say, “No, we’re not going out of business. We’re fine.”

MO: I mean, obviously, legally and financially, it was a hit but also just sort of politically in—you know, just out there in the public.

JM: Yes, sort of the public perception of two newspapers must have made an impact. And that may have been about the time—I guess that was when Hugh started shopping around. Well, I think I’ve heard that maybe he had talked to somebody about it even before losing the lawsuit. But, at any rate—so—the Dillard’s [department store chain based in Little Rock] ad—they lost Dillard’s, but I believe—didn’t that occur after Gannett took over or do you remember?

MO: Actually, I think you’re right. I think that *was* after Gannett took over.

JM: Yes.

MO: Yes. That was [laughs]—you probably—there was a whole series of things that happened there, I guess. Some of it seemed to be related to news coverage, and then there was—you know, the *Democrat* offered them this cheaper price to kind of, I guess—but at the same time, there was a series of news stories, one involving I think maybe Mr. Dillard’s son doing doughnuts [with his car] in somebody’s yard in the Pulaski Heights [residential area of Little Rock].

JM: I think it was a grandson, yes.

MO: And there was—I mean, I never was involved in the details where there was this—the story went, though, that the *Gazette* was going to write this story, and the *Democrat* said, “Well, we’ll leave the kid’s name out if the *Gazette* does.” But the *Gazette* wouldn’t, and so that was one sticking point. And then there was the deal where the headquarters building is now. It was an old hippie neighborhood and whether we should’ve done some of the stories that were done on that.

JM: Yes.

MO: And there was some deal where other advertisers were being offered these last-minute deals for ads in the paper. If there was like a hole [Editor’s Note: an unfilled area on the newspaper page] or something, and somehow they weren’t offering the same deal to the Dillards, and we heard that was sort of the last straw when they found out about that.

JM: Yes, I’ve heard that rumor, too. The one thing that chapped them off was that they was always—that Dillard’s was by far the largest advertiser, and they were

always told, “Nobody gets a better rate than you do,” but he found out that they were offering some advertisers of similar material better rates. But that may have been—I don’t remember what point that may have been under Gannett. But, yes—and I also heard the story about his grandson, but what really chapped him off was that the *Gazette* not only used his name but also ran it on the front page. And he didn’t think that was hardly worthy of a front-page story. [Laughs]

MO: There was something about that story that did not work out well.

JM: Yes. I’ve heard several people at the *Democrat*, at any rate, and I think a lot of these were particularly in the advertising department and circulation department and everything, and their view was that the *Gazette* was really arrogant and that it helped them.

MO: Right. Right. You know, I think that’s true. I mean, if you kind of look back over the whole fifteen-year history or something, I think that probably played into what eventually happened, you know.

JM: Yes, and it was just my perception, and you’d have to read the paper for weeks and everything, but I also—and I worked at the *Gazette* for sixteen years—I thought that after a period of time that they were just sort of on, you know—they were sort of coasting . . .

MO: Well, I think there was sort of a—what I would say is somehow we didn’t make sort of a leap from that old—and I think after a while we were really trying to, but from that old newspaper-of-record sort of thing and that much more kind of old-style journalism, old-style paper to more kind of modern, more aggressive paper. I think that was the big struggle that making that transition—it was not

happening very well.

JM: Yes. Maybe even—I'm not sure this is the case—but maybe even that more sparkling newspaper writing was coming into vogue at that time, too.

MO: Right.

JM: And the—you know, a little more—or livelier, I guess I should say.

MO: Yes, right. Right. You know, I think that the feeling that—I mean, just looking back on it, I'm not sure if you would be in the middle of all of this, I would've agreed with it, I guess. But, looking back on it, you know, you see where maybe we had that real stellar sort of editorial page and kind of did the real—kind of the newspaper of record stuff.

JM: Yes.

MO: But really trying to move into, you know, like the better writing—more interesting writing—then into really kind of focus on investigative stuff, which is all part of big newspapers now. I think that wasn't—I think we kind of had to be pushed into that a little bit, you know.

JM: Yes, yes. That was my impression to a degree. But would you have ever dreamed, say, maybe until right at the very last though—would you have ever dreamed that in a war between the *Democrat* and the *Gazette* that the *Democrat* would win?

MO: No. I mean, that was shocking the way that all kind of went down. You're right, just from somebody who grew up in Little Rock and had worked at both papers, I never would've thought it.

JM: Yes, I was the same way, having worked at both papers. And I haven't found

anybody yet who would've said—well, maybe the last month or two or something like that, but they just never would've dreamed that that would have happened because my impression always was that for eighty years or seventy years, and particularly all the time that it had been operated by Mr. Engel, that he was content to be the number two newspaper.

MO: Right.

JM: And that he didn't make much effort to try to be number one. So I think that everybody thought, you know, "Well, when it comes down to a war, if it gets to that, obviously, the *Gazette* is going to prevail." And it probably would have if the *Democrat* had stayed in the afternoon . . .

MO: Right.

JM: . . . because afternoon newspapers were going out of business all over the country.

MO: Well, you brought up the idea of the JOA thing. You know, you look out here in New Mexico—since I wasn't around, I don't have the specific details at the tip of my finger, but, you know, one of the first JOAs if not *the first* is this one between the *Journal* and the *Albuquerque Tribune*.

JM: Yes.

MO: And I think it's decades old now, and the *Trib* is part of Scripps-Howard, and its circulation is down to less than, like, 13,000, I think.

JM: Yes.

MO: But it can survive because it's still the afternoon paper. By all normal economic rules, it shouldn't have been around. Because of the JOA, it's still getting a good chunk of the advertising revenue, and it's still there.

JM: Yes, it's the afternoon paper, and it has a joint operating agreement with the *Journal*, right?

MO: Right.

JM: And the *Journal* is a morning paper and the *Tribune* is an afternoon paper.

MO: Right.

JM: Yes, okay.

MO: And the JOA is the only reason it's still going. They've got a real small staff, and they still do some good stuff.

JM: Yes.

MO: But their circulation just continues to drop.

JM: Yes.

MO: I mean, I don't know if it can get any smaller. They might—it has kind of a hard core of people who still read it, and that's probably what it's going to be.

JM: What is the circulation on the *Journal*?

MO: The *Journal* is like, roughly 110,000 daily and 150,000 on Sunday. Yes. I mean, everybody keeps waiting for something to happen with the *Trib*. And its demise has been rumored, you know, ever since I've been out here. But it keeps going.
[Editor's note: the *Albuquerque Tribune* ceased operations in February of 2008]

JM: Okay, well, between this and Ernie's interview with you, we've covered a lot of ground.

MO: I'm sorry I'm kind of—like I say, maybe what would've been cool is for me to go back and look at some of the *Democrats* from that period just to kind of spark my memory.

JM: Is there anything else that you can think of now and particularly about the *Democrat* or about the war between the *Democrat* and the *Gazette* that you haven't touched on that you'd like to add?

MO: No, I—not off the top of my head. But let me do some poking around when I'm sitting around, and if I come up with anything, I'll let you know.

JM: Yes, I'd appreciate it if you would.

[End of Interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]